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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000792

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DEPT FOR EB A/S ANTHONY WAYNE; SA/INS FOR J. BRENNIG, N.  
DEAN; PLEASE PASS TO TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION TASK FORCE;  
TREASURY FOR C. CARNES

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN POST-TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION UPDATE  
(APRIL 27, 2005)

1. (U) This cable contains an action request, please see para 7. Post-tsunami transition from relief to reconstruction continues. The pace and organization of tsunami relief and reconstruction remains on par with

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previous reporting.

Joint Mechanism with LTTE: Going nowhere fast

2. (SBU) The mood surrounding a potential joint mechanism for tsunami aid distribution in the north and east is increasingly negative. The Government's coalition partner, the Marxist-Nationalist Jamuna Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), continues its criticisms of a potential mechanism, though we hear differing reports about whether they have threatened to pull out of the governing coalition over this issue. Charge plans to meet the Norwegian Ambassador this week to discuss Norway's impressions, though during Special Envoy Eric Solheim's recent visit the Norwegians were very positive about progress on the joint mechanism. President Kumaratunga's return from vacation is a key factor here. Septel to follow later this week.

Temporary Shelter: USAID/DART Survey

3. (U) USAID/OFDA is bringing in an OFDA Urban Planning/Urban Disaster Mitigation specialist to monitor the transitional shelter program, examine its relationship to the larger efforts to build permanent housing, and promote coastal zone management. The issues plaguing the transitional shelter process continue to be slow land allocation (primarily in the east, a large area of land was cleared for the south last week) and a generally tight market for building supplies.

GSL HR Commission Consultant: Aid Distribution Fair

4. (SBU) In a recent conversation with Poloff, Lionel Fernando (a retired, senior civil servant who has previously served abroad in diplomatic assignments and as Foreign Secretary), who was appointed by the Human Rights Commission to review aid programs in the North and East, reported that aid was being distributed fairly in the tsunami affected areas of the North and East. He opined

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that while progress on the political front in Colombo has stagnated, cooperation between the various actors in the field has continued, although predictably not as efficiently as immediately after the tsunami hit.

100 Meter Zone: GSL Needs Face Saving Way Out

5. (SBU) The 100/200 meter coastal exclusion zone remains an impediment to rebuilding, but has the support of the President and, by extension, the rest of the GSL. Nonetheless, continued problems in finding land to relocate affected persons, as well as haphazard enforcement of the rules, has brought pressure on the Government to ease its restrictions. This has become a hot-button political issue, however, with opposition politicians calling for the GSL to remove the exclusion zone, and the President digging in her heels over the issue.

6. (SBU) In our discussions with senior GSL officials on the exclusion zone, they generally recognize that they have an intractable problem and acknowledge there will be need for flexibility in implementation. Some continue to hold to the fallacy that there is a "scientific" rationale for the exclusion zone, though no explanation based on scientific evidence has ever been provided. Visits to the affected areas indicate that enforcement is spotty, with the exclusion being outright ignored in several areas. Further, the way the regulation was written, which allows homes or institutions that were not damaged beyond 40 percent to remain, creates an equity issue that could inflame tensions on the ground.

7. (SBU) While on the one hand the donor community is

stymied in its efforts to move forward with implementing projects, particularly on the housing front, as a result of this regulation, we think that any approach to the Government on the issue has to be handled with sensitivity to the President's primary concern that a public reversal would be used by the opposition to score political points. As we have seen on many other fronts, this Government in general (and the President in particular) does not respond well when cornered. Therefore, we suggest the following path, and request Department and other agency support as required:

--We believe it could be useful to host a small digital video conference (DVC) with key government players to discuss the coastal exclusion zone concept. From the US side, we believe representatives from FEMA, USGS and other agencies that might have a perspective on coastal zone management would be useful. Our initial discussions with representatives from the Tsunami Warning Center and other tsunami threatened areas have revealed that many coastal

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areas do not enforce building zones, per se, but instead focus on creating evacuation zones, with emergency preparedness efforts designed to remove people from harm's way in the event of an impending emergency. This DVC should not be widely publicized, but merely provide input to Government decision makers to help increase their understanding of best practices.

--We should avoid publicly chastising the GSL on this matter, but should look for ways to promote a proactive move by the Government, to abandon the zones in favor of another approach, at least in some areas, not just as a result of pressure from the opposition and the international community. It could be couched in a decision to apply best practices, and could be touted as the result of consultations with affected communities and the need to be sensitive to their needs. Such an approach could be pursued by the Ambassador and others at Post with key GSL officials, including the President, and should be followed by an effort to provide public support from key members of the international community for the decision. But any effort needs to be quiet and discreet devoid of public statements and chastising. We imagine the exclusive zone will be discussed considerably at the mid-May development forum.

18. (U) Post appreciates Department's consideration of this idea and requests support in the development of an appropriate DVC program.

ENTWISTLE